

## “THE COST TO PAUL OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL”

For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. (2 Corinthians 11:19-20 NKJV)

Over twenty years ago, after his son was diagnosed with a fatal disease, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE. It was a best seller and is still in print. Here are some quotations from his book.

“I believe in God. But...I recognize His limitations. He is limited in what He can do by laws of nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters...I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason...

God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply the inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws.

The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.”

After the devastation of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma there are many people, those who have suffered and those hearing the news will latch on to answers like those proposed by Rabbi Kushner. These answers deny what God says about Himself in the Bible. He is not limited, He is almighty and nothing happens that is not His will.

Jesus was asked the meaning of two tragic events in His day.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1-5 NKJV)

1.) I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little. What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast. For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that! But in whatever anyone is bold--I speak foolishly--I am bold also. (2 Corinthians 11:16-21 NKJV)

Paul now writes what is known as an "aside." It is so personal that he does not want to ascribe it to the Lord. That is, he does not claim for it the inspiration by the Holy Spirit which is the authority for calling the Bible "God's Word."

The false apostles have gained their position and authority in the Corinthian church by boasting of their superior knowledge and by disparaging the teachings of Paul and belittling him. Paul now allows himself the liberty of boasting on his own behalf.

The Corinthians were proud of their wisdom. They were learned in the philosophers and poets of classical Greece. Paul begins with a sarcastic barb about their wisdom and wonders why they tolerate fools. He means the false apostles.

Apparently, these false apostles wielded their authority with arrogance and boldness. They made servants of some of the brethren, took from the members even to the extent of devouring all they had. They were like Samuel's sons. (1Sam 2:12-17) The false apostles exalted themselves and struck anyone who opposed them.

Paul says with false modesty, "To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that! But in whatever anyone is bold--I speak foolishly--I am bold also." At this point Paul begins to boldly enumerate the great personal cost he has paid in order to carry the Gospel to places where it had not been known before he preached it, including in Corinth.

2.) Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? --I speak as a fool--I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:22-28 NKJV)

Paul's list of sufferings for the sake of Christ is breathtaking. The false apostles would not have endured any of these trials for the sake of being ministers of Jesus Christ. If persecution does anything good, it separates true believers from those who are hypocrites. In Egypt, a woman whose husband was murdered by a radical Islamist was being interviewed by a reporter when the murderer was arrested. She said that she forgives the murderer even as Christ had forgiven her. The reporter remarked, "These Christians are of a different kind."

Paul was not unique in enduring persecution in order to serve God and preach the Word. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and then imprisoned when he was falsely accused. Moses had to flee Egypt and live in the desert herding sheep for forty years. Elijah lived the life of a fugitive for years before he died. John the Baptist was imprisoned and then had his head cut off because his preaching offended the queen. The apostle James was executed by the king. John was exiled to a deserted island. The early Christians were used as torches, bait, and victims in the Coliseum. Any one of them could have escaped their trials by denying Christ and some did.

Paul says that besides these tribulations, greater stress is the deep distress he feels daily in his concern for all the churches.

3.) Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

(2 Corinthians 11:29-33 NKJV)

Paul elaborates on what he means in saying “besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.” Paul doesn’t just sympathize with the brethren and churches who are suffering, being persecuted, going through disputes among the members. He empathizes with their distress. Their pain becomes his pain also. He wrote a similar idea in his letter to the Colossians:

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, (Colossians 1:24)

Paul concludes by saying that everything he has to boast about are those things concerning his weaknesses.

This chapter ends with what, to me is a humorous note. Paul wasn’t writing on a computer where he could go back and insert something he had forgotten. Having concluded his personal aside of boasting about all that he had suffered in order to preach the Gospel, he has an “Oh, I forgot something.” In the very beginning of his career this incident happened:

In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands. (2 Corinthians 2:31-33)

“If thou but suffer God to guide thee,  
And hope in Him through all thy ways,  
He’ll give thee strength, whate’er betide thee,

And bear thee through the evil days;

Who trusts in God’s unchanging love Builds on the rock that naught can move  
Be patient and await His leisure In cheerful hope, with heart content,

To take whate’er the Father’s pleasure And His discerning love hath sent;  
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known To Him who chose us for His own.”

*Georg Neumark, translated by Catherine Winkworth*